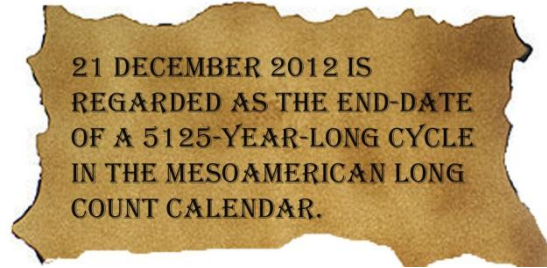


# End of the World Vizha

Sachi R



Some days ago, just when I had finished posting a suggestion at Rasikas.Org that we should have a Margazhi Rasikas Short Story contest, a dear friend confided this awesome news. I mean the message in the prophesy scroll you see above. I was baffled. I checked up in Wikipedia, which told me that this Mayan statement is only an eschatological belief. I then had to look up a dictionary, which clarified that these words meant an “end of the world” prediction.

Some memory in a corner of my mind stirred. Remember the year 2000, when many planets all aligned themselves in a line to confer great spiritual energy on mankind? A Shambhala aspirant wrote then:

*By now you've probably heard about the big planetary alignment in early May....an alignment of seven planets (including the Sun, Moon, Earth and inner planets) in Taurus predicted since ancient times. This line-up offers us unprecedented levels of energy to support quantum changes in our lives, our spiritual evolution, our healing and the Earth Mother's healing.*

The memory came back to me how I spent that important day, 5 May 2000, in the company of Swami Premananda of Uttarkashi. After bathing in the Ganga just next to his ashram, we all went up to Gangotri, to witness the opening of the holy temple for summer. On the way, he told me the story of “The end of the world”, as narrated in Yoga Vasishtha.

Voila! Why don't I flesh out that interesting narrative a bit and share it as my short story at Rasikas.Org!!!!???? So here is my story:

## End of the World Vizha

The time has come to end this world as we know it. Saraswati, the goddess of all learning, is full of sorrow. She is inconsolable that mankind, poised at the pinnacle of development, will vanish and everything will go whoosh. She calls Narada for advice. He says, well, it is time for action, and let us call a special session of Heavenly Parliament.

All the gods assemble, and Narada tells them about how creation should come to an end as per the Mayan calendar on 21 Dec. 2012. But then Saraswati gets up, and makes an impassioned speech saying that such a disaster prediction needs heavenly endorsement really and is worth reconsidering, since mankind has achieved great progress under her care. Everyone looks at Vishnu. He looks strangely nonchalant, and his demeanour

conveys eloquently that he thinks, "Well, what must be must be". Shiva stands up, adjusts the elephant skin round his waist, picks up the trident, checks his third eye, and exclaims, "well I have been sitting on the bench too long. It's time for some real action stuff. It is long since I was busy at the momentous event of Ganga's descent and then the churning of the ocean by gods and demons in search of Amrita and my famous dance at Chidambaram." Saraswati seems a bit upset by such enthusiasm and stands up and says, "Shiva, I beg your permission to point out that destruction is easy, but construction is a difficult and time consuming endeavour. That really calls for so many creative energies to come together. Mankind, the ultimate specimen in creation, has done so much, and we should deeply ponder, as is the duty of this parliament, whether this Feverish Direct Intervention or FDI must be permitted." There is a moment of profound silence, and you could almost hear a pin drop, except for the reason that in heaven there is no floor, only some smoky cloudy surface. After some minutes, Narada says, "I have a proposal. Let us request Brahma to make a trip. Let Brahma see for himself whether mankind has achieved something so significant that we should preserve it and postpone FDI."

It seems a very reasonable suggestion, and Brahma himself is not against getting to know first-hand how man has bettered what he himself started long back. Vishnu agrees to this very intelligent proposal from his favourite Narada. Shiva sits down, a bit upset like a padded-up batsman held up in the pavilion by a sudden change in batting order, and his sulkiness is for all parliament to see. Vishnu, the eternal strategist and peace-maker, cajoles him, saying, "Shiva, it is only a couple of earthly days. Let Brahma make a trip on 21 Dec. and report back by midnight his first-hand assessment. We shall then decide either way and dispense the decision quickly."

So it's all settled, and Brahma comes down that day incognito, to see and decide for himself. But being a bit unsure of the confusing earthly topography, he is looking for someone to take him around the right places. On Narada's advice, and also given the shortage of time, Brahma finally chooses to spend it at Chennai Margazhi Vizha! Narada quickly arranges for a tall, white-haired, wise, local guide for him, whom we shall call Gov.

The day 21 Dec. 2012 dawns like any other Margazhi day in Chennai, a bit misty and pleasantly cool. Gov. tells Brahma that Margazhi Vizha is a special occasion, especially this December. There are over 3000 cultural events packed into about 40 days, all in the medium-sized urban agglomerate called Chennai. Just to refresh Brahma's memory, Chennai has been the seat of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam since the decline of the Tanjore kings. Great artistes, composers, teachers, and connoisseurs have created a unique milieu for cultural betterment in Chennai. Even Englishmen, who ruled Chennai and called it Madras, had enjoyed these native entertainments. Slowly, the Margazhi month, known as the most auspicious month for spiritual practice, and also the relatively cool period of the year in the boiling hot Chennai, has become a period in the cultural calendar of the world when thousands congregate to display and enjoy artistic achievements like Carnatic music, Bharatanatyam dance, and many allied areas of human creativity. The local newspapers, TV channels, radio and every other media extensively cover individual artistes, and art events, with great interest and competency. Lots of NRI's, a name for highly educated Indians who earn in Dollars but save and spend in Rupees thereby amassing wealth, come down for a strong dose of cultural inebriation. It is all a big happening, and Brahma is in the right place at the right time to assess the highest point of human evolution. Given the limited time, the best plan would be that they quickly visit all the major sabhas and attend many events throughout the day, and meet interesting people.

On Gov.'s advice, they start out early and take in the morning sessions- full of abhangs, bhajans, and nama-sankeertanams. Brahma is quite impressed. So much fervour! Brahma remembers the great saints Tukaram and Namdev. After a couple of hours, during which time Gov. looks patently bored, Gov. suggests that they should beat the Ten O'clock crowd and check in for a quick breakfast at Gnanambal's. What is Gnanambal's? Gov. explains that, paraphrasing Swami Vivekananda, one can say "First food, then culture". There are many splendid canteens just outside event venues, and these are busy happening places dishing out fantastic fare throughout the day, hot and ready to be consumed quickly, by the culturally inclined who have to pull themselves out from great music and dance presentations to upload some calories into their overworked systems.

Gnanambal's, full of so many people congregated with a single-minded purpose, presents a picture similar to a busy Indian airport with cancelled Kingfisher flights. The difference is that people are cheerfully exclaiming that they can't complain because thank God there is some plentiful good food on offer.

Edging their way in to partake of steamy stuff, Brahma and Gov. get to hear all the spicy Vizha conversation. There is an animated discussion among some die-hard Carnatic fans about how Chennai Vizha is the greatest cultural event in the world. Tamil is a truly international language and Tamil Culture is shining during this time. No other place or event can boast such a rush of events, talents, tourists and talk. Take for example abhangs. Abhangs have entered prime time in Carnatic concerts. Credit should go to Carnatic music for having liberated the old Marathi "Vithhala Vithhala" boring stuff. Abhangs have since got a much-needed makeover. It is almost like in that movie with the Dream Girl of Indian cinema, Seetha, a dowdy, weepy, saree-clad girl, is replaced by Geetha, a skirt-clad tight-rope gymnast. That is the contrast between the old and new genres of abhangs. Same way, Carnatic music has become modern, and kudumis are so passé-unless you are a head-banging fusion artist. There are designer kurtas, Greek columns on stage, and live-tweets of concert happenings.

Brahma and Gov. also hear that a new ice-cream parlour called Raagum has come up opposite the Academy, with ice-creams served in flavours named after ragas- Bhairavi, Todi et al. You can select a cone, a cup, a sorbet, jelly or a sundae, respectively likened to varnam, kriti, viruttam, bhajan and RTP. The parlour has live audio/video feeds from a few concerts so you can just stay put there and savour true ragas both ways.

Well, time to go. Randomly picking another venue, a bit recklessly, the two spill into a major lec-dem of a 72-mela Maha medley. Brahma is amazed to see such technical complexity. He says understanding Carnatic music seems to compare with advantage to nerdy efforts in ethical hacking. Gov. solemnly asks Brahma a quiz question: what is the one common thing in all these- India's greatest mathematician, physicist, orator, music composer, musicologist, movie star, and poet? Brahma looks stymied. "They all loved Idli Sambar and spoke Tamil!" (They are Ramanujan, Raman, Srinivasa Sastri, Dikshitar, Venkatamakhin, Rajnikant and Bharati). No wonder our Carnatic music is the only classical art so complete, so complex, and so compelling. But then again, Gov. tells Brahma, it's nothing to worry about! Brahma can buy an Android app to identify any song or raga instantly from a music sample. The app is called Mela Nutcracker.

They find that there is also a Google Maps application showing dozens of active Vizha venues, with all the details of who-what-when-where. But to Brahma's chagrin, when he switches on his television eye, he finds very sparse audiences in any auditorium! What happened to the teeming crowds that Gnanambal's hinted at, and that Brahma expected? He had thought, especially after that medley, that people would be lapping up

Gamanashrama RTP's! Gov. tells it like it is: Vizha is all about being "in", being an "insider", not actually squatting in concerts. For anyone, a really committed concert attendance is purely optional. On the other hand, the tension is only for the artistes, as they would be drinking herbal concoctions to preserve themselves and also going crazy trying to please audiences and appease the critics, hoping for a few column-centimetres of successful promotion. The end result? You wouldn't see many crowds, except in the star-studded silken shows of the evening slots.

They then walk in to a hall and hear an erudite talk on *Womanity - Selfhood and Tenacity as Keynotes for Sangam Women*. Brahma says, man, this is something, even in heaven women aren't like that- "tough as nuts."

Brahma remembers what effort they had to put in to make just one Durga. But Gov. says, just wait, you'll see that almost all the evening slots today are dominated by women. The only field to remain 100% male-dominated is Khanjira play so far.

There's a Hindu online video report on the snazziest fashions coming up during this Vizha. There are also full page articles on how corporates are spending big time on culture. Brahma is duly pleased. Well, he says, "dharma must supersede artha and kama after all, as it has to pave the way for moksha." Gov. says the correct word is not moksha, but nirvana. Nirvana? Yes, it means the last concert slot of the day at any venue. And it will be a fitting finale to their busy day.

A TV crew accosts them. What are their impressions? Which venue is best, what canteen is their favourite? Are they NRI's? Do McDonald's and Pizza Hut serve the same taste and quality here as in Manhattan? Can they define what a raga is? Isn't Carnatic fusion the way to go?

After mumbling some off-hand replies, Brahma hurries away, asking Gov. why there is so much drama, instead of the music and bhava flow that Brahma was looking forward to? Gov. solemnly informs him that Carnatic music is the only spiritual art form that intimately mixes filmy drama with sampradaya, and not just because Chennai has been ruled by film personalities for over 40+ years now. Where else but here do male classical musicians touch up their eye-brows, wear designer coiffure and carry powder puff?

The idea of attending a lovely evening concert, full of bhava, rasa and happy crowds, begins to interest Brahma. Brahma is looking forward to a sweet rendering of Kaa Vaa Vaa in Varali. Alas, as they say, Brahma proposes but man disposes. Gov. tells him that the top choices for the prime slot that day are two: one is a fusion concert by a crew called A'ha O'ho Jalra, led by a thoroughbred Punjabi-Iyer from Canada. His fame is built on a unique style of creative outpouring that specialises in Bhangra-influenced Carnatic fusion. For example, Jalra is known to have introduced distinct Bhangra flavours into a vigorous version of Endaro Mahanubhavulu. He claims that Bharatiyar's patriotic eulogies and their Punjabi translations by Dr. Kohli have inspired his fusion attempts. When the turbaned Jalra says "Balle, Balle", it is so reminiscent of the "Bale, Bale" exclamations of old Carnatic doyens.

Gov. also tells Brahma enthusiastically that India's #1 soft drinks brand is sponsoring Jalra's nationwide tour under the name "Dil Mange A'ha O'ho". All sabhas in Chennai are happy that this is drawing youngsters into

concerts, and the sabhas are apportioning floor space for enthusiastic fans who insist on jiving to Jala's music.

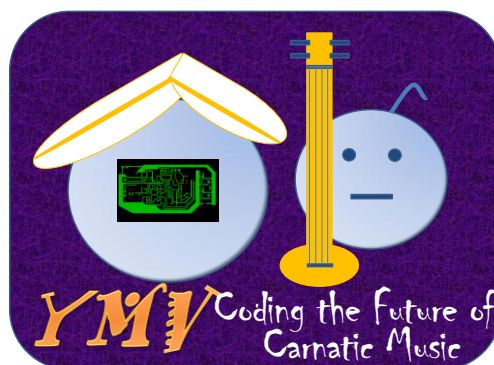
Brahma gives a strange look and asks, "What is the other choice?"

Gov. says that the second one is even more interesting. It is a confluence of cutting edge AI and CM. It is a long story. Prof. Yamachi Mataka from Japan, a robotics and AI expert, has produced a computer that can sing and provide accompaniment all by itself. Named Vid.Chitti Babu, this fruitful invention is the result of a long collaboration of Prof. Yamachi Mataka with Vid.Vaseegaran. Vidwan is a sixth generation classical musician with lineage traceable to the trinity. In fact, the blockbuster movie Enthiran actually stole their life story.

Together, the two masters have invented a humanoid robot that sits on the stage and performs a manodharma-laden concert for 3 hours, synthesizing pure music in all its colours, including even a complex RTP. The AI + CM is built on a foundation of 10000 digitised concert recordings, lasting about 1.5 million minutes, with hundreds of songs and manodharma pieces in each raga. The Prof. has developed a powerful algorithm that has extracted the idiom and intelligence of Carnatic music and can in turn create new vocal versions of any of thousands of krithis, dripping with improvisation, rasa, bhava and lakshana. Chitti intuitively even the repertoire all by himself. Chitti is touted as the greatest invention since the wheel. Vid.Vaseegaran has to merely sit on the stage, connect himself at the wrist by a special cable to Vid.Chitti Babu. Chitti uses Naadi vibrations and bio-feedback to pick up the instantaneous manodharma of Vid.Vaseegaran to develop the music impromptu. You must realise that Vaseegaran doesn't merely sit on the stage and emote within himself; he also keeps busy playing the tambura. And mind you, this is a real tambura with real strings, not a dumb box and knob twirls. You see, both Vaseegaran and Mataka are staunch traditionalists.

Theirs is a true innovation because it is not a canned jukebox fare. You see, the robot picks up Vaseegaran's innermost vibrations and creates the music in accordance.

This breakthrough invention is being unveiled today and the CM herself will be present along with the Japanese Ambassador, in a show of solid bonding between the two great cultures.



Brahma asks if the whole system is fail-safe since robots have gone wrong frequently. Gov. informs that yes, there is some software glitch that gives mild electric shocks, and this in turn makes both Chitti and Vaseegaran kind of leap into the air a few inches once in a while. But at the preview, knowledgeable critics have commented that this edginess actually underlines its verisimilitude of the Carnatic idiom, since famous doyens of yore also leaped animatedly at important moments in the concert.

Brahma doesn't know whether to laugh or cry, since he always imagined that music is the spontaneous creative expression unique to real human beings. But then, Brahma is so old-fashioned, you see!

Brahma says that he has seen enough and it is time to go. Narada makes an appearance. He sidles up to Gov. and asks, hushed, how was the day? Gov. says he has been so busy explaining things to Brahma that he forgot to ask how Brahma felt about the Vizha experience. But Narada needs to know. He goes up to Brahma and looks into his face meaningfully.

Brahma shakes his head. He looks like someone who has been stumped by a troubled Shadvidhamargini alapaṇa.

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